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Schmidt, Eva

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# New Trouble for “Reasons as Evidence”: Means That Don’t Justify the Ends\*

*Eva Schmidt*

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In this article, I argue against Kearns and Star’s reasons-as-evidence view, which identifies normative reasons to  $\phi$  with evidence that one ought to  $\phi$ . I provide a new counterexample to their view, the student case, which involves an inference to the best explanation from means to end or, more generally, from a derivative to a more foundational “ought” proposition. It shows that evidence that one ought to act a certain way is not in all cases a reason so to act. I present a diagnosis of the problem that is brought out by the counterexample.

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In this article, I argue against a central claim of Kearns and Star’s reasons-as-evidence view,

**RA:** Necessarily, a fact  $F$  is a reason for an agent  $A$  to  $\phi$  iff  $F$  is evidence that  $A$  ought to  $\phi$  (where  $\phi$  is an action).<sup>1</sup>

In particular, I criticize its right-to-left direction:

**RA<sup>R-L</sup>:** Necessarily, if a fact  $F$  is evidence that  $A$  ought to  $\phi$  then  $F$  is a reason for  $A$  to  $\phi$ .

\* I’d like to thank audiences at the Workshop on Normativity and Meaning, Saarbrücken 2014, and at the GAP.9, Osnabrück 2015, for helpful comments. Special thanks go to Jan Gertken, Benjamin Kiesewetter, Susanne Mantel, Michael Ridge, and two anonymous referees of this journal.

1. Stephen Kearns and Daniel Star, “Reasons as Evidence,” in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4:215–42, 216.

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I provide a new counterexample to this direction of (RA), the student case, which involves an inference to the best explanation along means-end or, more generally, derivative-foundational "ought" relations. It shows that evidence that one ought to act a certain way is not in all cases a normative reason to do so. I then present a diagnosis of the problem that is brought out by this counterexample.

## I. KEARNS AND STAR'S VIEW OF REASONS AS EVIDENCE

Here is the defining claim of Kearns and Star's account of reasons:

**R:** Necessarily, a fact *F* is a reason for an agent *A* to  $\phi$  iff *F* is evidence that *A* ought to  $\phi$ .<sup>2</sup>

They suggest (but don't argue) that "the property of being a reason and the property of being evidence of an ought are identical."<sup>3</sup> For caution's sake, they prefer (and argue for) the weaker "if and only if" claim. Nothing I discuss hinges on this distinction—so, from now on, when I say that they equate reasons with evidence for ought propositions, this can be read as the (weaker) claim that facts that are reasons are also evidence for ought propositions and vice versa.

Let me next clarify the following notions involved in (R): (*a*) that of a reason to  $\phi$ , (*b*) that of evidence for a proposition, and (*c*) that of an "ought" proposition.

(*a*) A reason to  $\phi$  is a normative reason, a reason that counts in favor of a certain action or a belief.<sup>4</sup> For instance, that people are starving in Africa is a reason for Amy to donate money to Oxfam.

(*b*) Kearns and Star suggest a probabilistic take on the notion of evidence but at the same time explicitly leave it open how we should characterize the notion further. They seem drawn to two slightly different notions of evidence, one more objective and the other more subjective. On the one hand, for a fact to be evidence for a proposition is for it to reliably indicate the truth of that proposition, or more precisely, "a fact is evidence for a proposition if and only if relevantly similar facts reliably indicate relevantly similar propositions."<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, the weight of a piece of evidence is determined by how much it raises the probability of the truth of a relevant proposi-

2. Ibid. Note that this claim is more general than (RA), " $\phi$ " being neutral between "act a certain way" and "believe that *p*."

3. Ibid., 219.

4. Ibid., 215.

5. Ibid., 230.

tion for the subject.<sup>6</sup> That a piece of evidence raises the probability of a proposition is to say that, with the piece of evidence in the picture, the proposition is more likely to be true than in the light of the subject's other evidence all by itself.<sup>7</sup> Once we account for the weight of a piece of evidence in these terms, it is plausible also to spell out the notion of evidence completely in terms of facts that subjectively raise the probability of a proposition.<sup>8</sup> In what follows I stick with this second understanding of "evidence." Note, however, that nothing here hangs on this; fixing the notion of evidence in this way just makes it easier to present my counterexample.

(c) An "ought" proposition is a normative proposition, a proposition that states what someone ought to do or to believe or an obligation they have. "Ought" propositions can be true or false; if true, they are identified with facts. In the cases that Kearns and Star are interested in, it is the truth of such propositions that is made more probable by the evidence. Take the proposition that Amy ought to donate money to Oxfam. The probability that this proposition is true is raised, for Amy, by the fact that people are starving in Africa. (Given her previous evidence, the fact that she ought to donate money to Oxfam is more clearly true for her now that she has the additional piece of evidence that people are starving in Africa.) So this fact is evidence for Amy that she ought to donate money to Oxfam. By (RA<sup>R-L</sup>), this fact is then also a normative reason for Amy to donate money to Oxfam (see fig. 1).

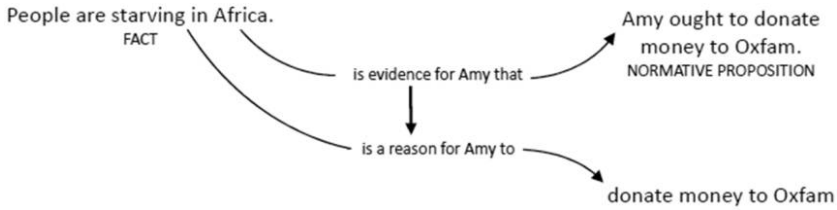
So much for an introduction of the reasons-as-evidence view. There are several general features that make it very attractive. As Kearns and Star point out, it provides a unified and enlightening account of reasons to act and to believe. That is, reasons to act and to believe are both identified with evidence for ought propositions; this is clearly more informative than saying, as some authors do, that no further elucidation of the notion of a normative reason is possible.<sup>9</sup> A related advantage from an epistemological standpoint is that the reasons-as-evidence view takes a definite stance on how evidence and epistemic normative reasons are related—an important issue that doesn't receive as much attention as it should in the epistemological literature.

6. Ibid., 232.

7. To be more precise, Kearns and Star hold that we have to evaluate the weight of a reason relative to a relevant subset of the subject's given evidence. I ignore this here because it makes no difference to my argument.

8. See John Brunero, "Reasons and Evidence One Ought," *Ethics* 119 (2009): 538–45, and the response in Stephen Kearns and Daniel Star, "Weighing Reasons," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 10 (2013): 70–86, where they show some sympathy for doing so.

9. See, e.g., Parfit's view in Derek Parfit and John Broome, "Reasons and Motivation," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 71 (1997): 99–146, 121.

FIG. 1.—Illustration of  $RA^{RL}$ .

Let me briefly present what I find is Kearns and Star’s most convincing argument for their view, aside from such general considerations.<sup>10</sup> According to them, it is central for reasons to act or to believe that they are weighed in an agent’s deliberation, when the agent decides what to do or what to believe. Reasons to act, in particular, just are those things that are weighed in practical deliberation. This relates to their practical significance. It is through a process of weighing reasons, of determining which action has the most weighty reasons behind it, that an agent decides on a certain action to perform. But what the agent really does when she deliberates what to do, is weigh the evidence that she has, for instance, the evidence Amy has that she ought to donate money to Oxfam, as compared to the evidence she has that she ought not to do so. This strongly suggests that the evidence that she weighs and the reasons to act that she weighs really are one and the same thing.

Kearns and Star’s view gives an account of what it is exactly that the agent does when she weighs her reasons in deciding what to do: she tries to figure out whether her evidence makes it more likely that she should pursue a certain course of action (e.g., donate money to Oxfam) or whether her evidence makes it more likely that she should not pursue it (e.g., that she should not donate money to Oxfam). As soon as the agent knows which course of action her evidence says she most likely ought to pursue, she will know what she has reason to do. The view can also explain how different reasons can add up to support one course of action (because different pieces of evidence can each add to the probability of an “ought” proposition) and how there can be reasons of different strengths (because different pieces of evidence can raise the probability that a certain proposition is true to different levels).

Given these advantages of the reasons-as-evidence view, it would be nice if it were successful. However, I will now argue that it—in particular, principle ( $RA^{RL}$ )—fails.

10. See Kearns and Star, “Reasons as Evidence,” 224–26, and “Reasons: Explanations or Evidence?” *Ethics* 119 (2008): 31–56, 39–41.

## II. THE STUDENT COUNTEREXAMPLE

Kearns and Star have successfully defended their view against a whole host of counterexamples.<sup>11</sup> I believe that my counterexample cuts more deeply than its precursors and that my diagnosis of the underlying problem spells substantial trouble for the reasons-as-evidence view. Here's the counterexample (see fig. 2).

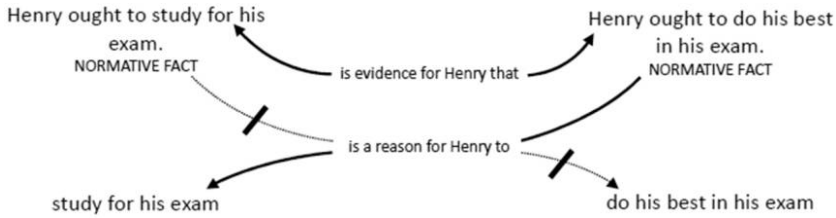
Henry wants to graduate from high school this year. To do so, he needs to pass his biology class. In order to pass the class, he has to do his best in his upcoming biology exam. In order to do his best in the exam, he needs to study all day Sunday. On Saturday night, Henry goes out and gets very drunk. He wakes up on Sunday and doesn't remember anything about his need to study and do his best in the exam.

After getting up, he sees a note from his dad, saying, "Study for your biology exam!" The fact that there is this note from his dad is testimonial evidence that Henry ought to study for his biology exam, as it raises the probability of the truth of this proposition. Henry correctly infers from the fact that there is the note from his dad to the proposition that he ought to study for his biology exam. Via inference to the best explanation, he then infers from the fact that he ought to study for his exam to the true proposition that he ought to do his best in the exam. Given Henry's other evidence, the fact that he ought to study for the biology exam raises the probability of, and is therefore evidence for, the truth of the proposition that he ought to do his best in the exam. (Imagine that no other explanation of the fact that he ought to study for the exam is available or at all plausible.)

By (RA<sup>R-L</sup>), it follows that the fact that Henry ought to study for the biology exam is his normative reason to do his best in the exam. But the fact that Henry ought to study for the exam is clearly not a normative reason for him to do his best in it: It does not count in favor of his doing his best in the exam. If anything, that he ought to do his best in the exam is a fact that counts in favor of his studying for the exam, or a normative reason for him to study for the exam.

At this point, a possible reply for Kearns and Star is that the fact that there is a note from his dad is a further testimonial reason for Henry to

11. See Kearns and Star, "Reasons: Explanations or Evidence?" "Reasons as Evidence," "Weighing Reasons," and "Reasons, Facts-about-Evidence, and Indirect Evidence," *Analytic Philosophy* 54 (2013): 237–43. For criticisms, see John Broome, "Reply to Southwood, Kearns and Star, and Cullity," *Ethics* 119 (2008): 96–108; Sean McKeever and Michael Ridge, "Elusive Reasons," in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7:110–37; Mark McBride, "Kearns and Star on Reasons as Evidence," *Analytic Philosophy* 54 (2013): 229–36; Guy Fletcher, "A Millian Objection to Reasons as Evidence," *Utilitas* 25 (2013): 417–20; and Kieran Setiya, "What Is a Reason to Act?" *Philosophical Studies* 167 (2014): 221–35.

FIG. 2.—Counterexample to (RA<sup>R-L</sup>)

study for the exam and therefore also for him to do his best in the exam. Since, unlike McKeever and Ridge,<sup>12</sup> my aim here is not to appeal to the intuition that testimonial evidence is (typically) not a normative reason to act, I am willing to allow that the fact that there is a note from his dad is a normative reason for Henry to study and to do his best. Consequently, it will be more useful to have a ‘purer’ version of the student case: when Henry wakes up on Sunday morning, he suddenly remembers, out of the blue, that he ought to study for his exam. As before, he infers from this that he ought to do his best in the exam.

Many other examples with this structure could be constructed: I ought to  $\phi$  (be at home at 5:00, bake a cake, donate money to Oxfam). In virtue of this, I also ought to  $\psi$  (get in my car now, buy cake ingredients, get money from the bank). In these cases, it is plausible enough that the fact that I ought to  $\phi$  is a reason for me to  $\psi$ .<sup>13</sup> It’s a fact that I ought to do this one thing; in order to get it done, I have to do this other thing, so I ought to do the other thing; so that I ought to do the one thing is a reason for me to do the other thing. Generally speaking in such cases, I ought to perform the means act, given that I ought to perform the act that is the end of this means. That I ought to pursue the end is a reason for me to perform the means action.

In the counterexamples, I am somehow not aware that I ought to  $\phi$  but become aware that I ought to  $\psi$ . Via an inference to the best explanation, I take the fact that I ought to  $\psi$  as evidence that I ought to  $\phi$ —and the former fact really raises the probability of, or is evidence for, the truth of the latter proposition. (For example, I know that I ought to buy cake ingredients and realize this is best explained by the hypothesis that I have to bake a cake.) So, on (RA), the fact that I ought to  $\psi$  comes out as a reason for me to  $\phi$ , even though, in the counterexamples, it is only the fact that I ought to  $\phi$  that is a reason for me to  $\psi$ .<sup>14</sup> This is an implausible con-

12. See McKeever and Ridge, “Elusive Reasons.”

13. Even this may be debated—see below.

14. This leaves it open that there may be (atypical) cases in which  $A$ ’s  $\phi$ -ing is a means to  $A$ ’s  $\psi$ -ing, while  $A$ ’s  $\psi$ -ing is also a means to  $A$ ’s  $\phi$ -ing. For instance, reading more books is a means for  $A$  to learn to read better, and learning to read better is a means for  $A$  to read

sequence of the view that equates evidence that I ought to  $\phi$  and reasons for me to  $\phi$ . In particular, this tells against (RA<sup>R-L</sup>). It's not the case that necessarily, if F is abductive evidence that A ought to  $\phi$ , then F is a reason for A to  $\phi$ .

So far, I have assumed that "ought" facts can themselves be normative reasons to act, which is a controversial assumption.<sup>15</sup> Maybe we should restrict normative reasons to nonnormative, purely descriptive facts. I don't think that Kearns and Star have any independent motivation to accept this restriction, for they endorse the claim that facts that are evidence for "ought" propositions are themselves normative reasons, and I have shown that sometimes "ought" facts are evidence of this kind.<sup>16</sup> Still, let me briefly present how the same counterexample can be used against the reasons-as-evidence view without relying on the controversial assumption.

In the student case, a descriptive fact that is plausibly a normative reason for Henry to pass his biology class, to do his best in the exam, and to study for the exam is that he wants to graduate from high school this year.<sup>17</sup> Further, it is unproblematic that this descriptive fact is evidence that he ought to do his best in the exam and that he ought to study for it.<sup>18</sup> What the counterexample shows, then, is this: First, doing his best in the exam is a means to graduating from high school, and studying for the exam is a means to doing his best in it. Second, the fact that Henry ought to do his best in the exam, while it is not itself a reason for Henry to study for the exam, links his studying for the exam to a normative reason via the pertinent means-end relations, that is, to the fact that he wants to graduate from high school. Henry has a reason, this latter descriptive

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more books. So that A ought to read more books is a reason for A to learn to read better, and, at the same time, that A ought to learn to read better is a reason for A to read more books. What is important to my argument is that there are many means-end cases that do not have this reciprocal structure.

15. Special thanks to Susanne Mantel and Jan Gertken for emphasizing that this may be problematic and for discussion of other ways to pose the same problem.

16. Daniel Star, *Knowing Better: Virtue, Deliberation, and Normative Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 15, draws a distinction between derivative and fundamental reasons that might make it more palatable to treat normative facts as reasons. He might say that the normative facts in the student case are derivative reasons, which will at some point bottom out in a fundamental, nonnormative fact—such as that having a high school degree increases one's happiness—that makes the (means) actions right. I will appeal to derivative and (relatively) fundamental reasons and ought facts below in a slightly different way—what is important to me is merely that some reasons are more fundamental relative to other reasons, not that they are absolutely fundamental.

17. If you are unhappy with a fact that involves a mental state, just pick another fact, for instance, that Henry will lead a much happier life if he graduates from high school or that graduating from high school is an achievement.

18. It's also a reason to (evidence that he ought to) pass the biology class. I leave this out for ease of exposition.



fact, to study for the exam in virtue of the fact that he ought to do his best in it and in virtue of the relevant means-end relations. By contrast, the fact that Henry ought to study for the exam is not itself a reason for him to do his best in the exam, nor does it link his doing his best in the exam to another normative reason to do his best. It is not the case that Henry has a further normative reason to do his best in the exam in virtue of the fact that he ought to study for it (and the relevant means-end relations).

### III. DIAGNOSIS

What is going on in the student counterexample? What is essential to it is that Henry ought to study for his exam in virtue of the fact that he ought to do his best in it. This latter (end) "ought" fact is fundamental relative to the (means) fact that he ought to study for the exam, which is derived from it. To put the same idea in terms of reasons, Henry's reason to study for his exam is derived from his—relatively fundamental—reason to do his best in the exam. He has a reason to study because and only because he has a reason to do his best in the exam.<sup>19</sup>

The evidence relation between derived and relatively fundamental "ought" facts is symmetrical, in the sense that, typically, not only can the more fundamental "ought" fact be used as evidence for the derived one, but also the derived "ought" fact can be used as evidence for the more fundamental one. This is so because the derivative "ought" proposition is true in virtue of the truth of the relatively fundamental "ought" proposition. Given that Henry ought to do his best in the exam, plus background facts such as that he hasn't studied for it yet, that the exam is on Monday, and so on, it is going to be true that he ought to study all day

19. Means-end cases provide only the most conspicuous counterexamples of this kind to the reasons-as-evidence view. Generally, when a reason to  $\psi$  is entirely derived from a reason to  $\phi$ , the fact that  $A$  ought to  $\psi$  will not be a normative reason to  $\phi$ . In other counterexamples,  $\phi$ -ing is a particular way of  $\psi$ -ing (or  $\psi$ -ing is involved in  $\phi$ -ing). For instance, using basil for my pizza is a way of using herbs. The fact that basil on pizza tastes good is a reason for me to use basil for my pizza. Since using herbs is involved in using basil for my pizza, it is plausible that I have a reason to use herbs in virtue of having a reason to use basil for my pizza; that I ought to use basil for my pizza is a reason for me to use herbs (or it links my using herbs to a normative reason). Also, we might say that I ought to use herbs because I ought to use basil for my pizza. As in the student case, however, I do not therefore have a further reason to use basil for my pizza in virtue of having the derivative reason to use herbs—that I ought to use herbs does not count in favor of my using basil for my pizza, nor does it link my using basil to another normative reason. Nonetheless, when I suddenly remember that I ought to use herbs, I can use this true proposition as evidence to infer that I ought to use basil for my pizza (given that I never use herbs except when putting basil on my pizza, for instance). For a helpful discussion of fundamental and derivative "oughts"/reasons, see Shyam Nair, "Conflicting Reasons, Unconflicting 'Oughts,'" *Philosophical Studies* 173 (2016): 629–63.

Sunday. Further, the symmetry holds because the derivative “ought” fact is typically best explained by the obtaining of the more fundamental “ought” fact. Given that he ought to study for the exam, and given that it’s not the case that he ought to study for the exam so as to be a role model for his siblings, learn important biological facts, or the like, it is highly probable that Henry ought to do his best in it (for this is what best explains the fact that he ought to study for the exam). Consequently, either true proposition raises the probability that the other is true and is therefore evidence for it.

By contrast to the evidential relation between derivative and relatively fundamental “ought” facts, the normative favoring relation between them is asymmetrical. Given that Henry ought to study for the exam in virtue of the (end) fact that he ought to do his best in it, it is plausible that the fact that he ought to do his best in the exam is a normative reason for him to study or that this fact links his studying for the exam to a still more fundamental normative reason via means-end relations, for example, to the (end) fact that he wants to graduate from high school this year. But in the opposite direction, the (means) fact that Henry ought to study for the exam is not a normative reason for him to pursue his end (i.e., to do his best), nor does it link his doing his best to a further normative reason to pursue his end. This is so because Henry acquires a reason to study for his exam (to pursue the means) only from the prior fact that he ought to do his best in it (from his end). In other words, the normative strength of the proposition that he ought to study for the exam is derived entirely from the normative strength of the fact that he ought to do his best in the exam and, at bottom, from the fact that he wants to graduate from high school. The only thing that counts in favor of pursuing the means is the end to which it is a means. Given this, the means fact, that Henry ought to study for the exam, cannot somehow magically conjure up and pass back normative “oomph” to the more foundational end “ought” that it is derived from via the pertinent means-end relation. It is not a reason for Henry to do his best in the exam.<sup>20</sup>

One way to make this point very clear is to think about Henry after drawing the conclusion that he ought to do his best in the exam, from the remembered fact that he ought to study for it. Say he realizes (if not in these terms) that his having to study is best explained by the more fundamental fact that he ought to do his best in the exam and that studying is a

20. Note the structural similarities with Zagzebski’s argument that reliabilism cannot account for the greater value of knowledge as compared to the value of true belief. Reliability cannot add value to true belief, for its value is completely derived from the value of true belief. See Linda Zagzebski, “The Search for the Source of the Epistemic Good,” *Metaphilosophy* 34 (2003): 12–28. My argument here is that, in the counterexample, the means fact is not an additional reason to perform the end action, since its normative force is entirely derived from the normative force of the end fact.

means for him to do his best. Given this scenario, it just doesn’t make sense for him to think, ‘That I ought to study all day today is a *reason* for me to do my best; it *counts in favor of* my doing my best in the exam’. For how could it make sense, given that he realizes that studying is merely a means for him to do his best in the exam?

The asymmetry obtains between derivative and relatively fundamental “ought” facts, as well as derivative and relatively fundamental normative reasons generally. Where a subject ought to  $\psi$  only in virtue of the fact that she ought to  $\phi$ , the fact that she ought to  $\phi$  plausibly is, or at least links her  $\psi$ -ing to, a normative reason to  $\psi$ . But all that favors the subject’s  $\psi$ -ing in such cases is the more fundamental fact that she ought to  $\phi$  (or the further fact that counts in favor of her  $\phi$ -ing). So the fact that she ought to  $\psi$  cannot lend additional strength to the “ought” concerning the subject’s  $\phi$ -ing, from which it is derived. It is evidence that she ought to  $\phi$  but not a normative reason for her to  $\phi$ .<sup>21</sup>

This style of counterexample is at an advantage over existing counterexamples to (RA<sup>R-L</sup>), such as that the *Times* reports that people are starving in Africa intuitively is not a reason to donate money to Oxfam.<sup>22</sup> Such counterexamples largely rely on the intuition that mere indicators of normative reasons, particularly testimonial evidence, are not themselves normative reasons to act. Further, they appear to go hand in hand with accounts of reasons as right-makers or explanations of why an action is desirable. The weakness of these counterexamples is that they will appeal only to those who share the intuition or are already convinced by one of the accounts of normative reasons just mentioned. Cases of derivative and fundamental reasons, by contrast, are supported by the diagnosis that an “ought” fact that comes into existence only by virtue of a more

21. An anonymous referee suggests that Kearns and Star could respond to my counterexamples by revising (RA) to (RA\*): Necessarily, a fact  $F$  is a nonderivative reason for an agent  $A$  to  $\phi$  iff  $F$  is evidence that  $A$  ought to  $\phi$  (where  $\phi$  is an action). And, necessarily, a fact  $F$  is a derivative reason for an agent to  $\phi$  iff  $F$  is a reason to  $\phi$  only in virtue of the fact that there is a nonderivative reason for the agent to  $\psi$ . Even leaving aside the fact that this is incongruous with Star’s notion of fundamental and derivative reasons mentioned in n. 16, I don’t see how this move could be of use to Kearns and Star. They need to stick with an independently motivated notion of evidence such as the one appealed to in this article; by (RA\*), wherever there is evidence that  $A$  ought to  $\phi$ , there is a nonderivative reason for  $A$  to  $\phi$ ; so, e.g., in the student case, they would have to insist that the fact that Henry ought to study for his exam is a nonderivative reason for him to do his best. But this would mean that this “ought” fact counts in favor of Henry’s doing his best in the exam—even though it obtains only in virtue of the relatively fundamental “ought” fact that he ought to do his best. So it would give normative “oomph” to the “ought” concerning his doing his best despite the fact that it exists only in virtue of the fact that Henry ought to do his best in the exam in the first place. As I have argued, this is implausible.

22. This case is discussed by McKeever and Ridge, “Elusive Reasons,” and rebutted by Kearns and Star, “Reasons as Evidence.”

fundamental “ought” fact simply cannot turn around to count in favor of the action involved in the more fundamental “ought” fact.

#### IV. UPSHOT

In this article, I have argued that Kearns and Star’s reasons-as-evidence view fails. The student case is an instance of compelling counterexamples to their claim (RA<sup>R-L</sup>) that, necessarily, facts that are evidence that the agent ought to  $\phi$  are also reasons for her to  $\phi$ . For, as I have argued, Henry’s evidence that he ought to do his best in his biology exam is the derivative means fact that he ought to study for his exam; his normative reason to do his best in the exam is, instead, the fundamental end fact that he wants to graduate from high school this year.